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Edward Neukrug

Old Dominion University, eneukrug@odu.edu

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HUMAN SERVICES

Is Counseling For You

By
Edward Neukrug

Co-Authors: Michael Kalkbrenner, & Sandy-Ann Griffith



Have you been in counseling or therapy? If not, have you ever hesitated in seeing a counselor, or wondered why you felt so wary? Studies show about 20-35% of Americans having attended some form of counseling and psychotherapy compared to approximately 80% of mental health professionals.

Believing that counseling and psychotherapy could be helpful for anyone in alleviating problems, improving relationships, and developing a more positive outlook toward life, a Journal for Human Services research study explores why some people attend counseling or therapy while others do not.

Researchers, Ed Neukrug, Mike Kalkbrenner, and Sandy Griffith wondered why it was that some people seemed readily to attend counseling while others hesitate

or who don't attend often to their own detriment. Their research on attendance in counseling of helping professionals and their upcoming research on attendance in counseling of the public in general offers a thoughtful analysis which will hopefully shed some light on this important concern.

After an exhaustive review of the literature, researchers independently looked at over 60 potential barriers to attendance in counseling and eventually reduced this number down to 32 specific items. Their research found three broad areas or reasons likely to affect individuals who tend to avoid counseling and therapy. They identified these areas as "Fit," "Stigma," and "Value" to reflect the areas they represent.

Factor 1: Fit

Fit has to do with one's sense of comfort with being in counseling and whether one has the ability to trust the process of counseling will be beneficial. Some typical fit questions were related to whether a potential client believed a counselor would feel comfortable with the potential client's sexuality, disability, or other aspects of the client's identity. Other questions in this area assessed whether a potential client believed a counselor could understand him or her, was competent enough to deal with the client's problem and could keep the client's concerns confidential. In addition, other "fit" questions queried whether potential clients had a bad experience with a counselor in the past and if they thought they could find a counselor near to where they lived

Factor 2: Stigma

Stigma is the feeling of shame or embarrassment some people experience when they consider entering a counseling relationship. Some of the stigma questions highlighted whether a potential client believed their friends, family, peers, colleagues, or supervisors might view them negatively if they knew the individual was in counseling. Other questions focused on how some potential clients might consider themselves weak, embarrassed, or unstable if they were in counseling. Often, those with high scores on stigma believed others would judge them, and thus, they would feel badly if they were to enter counseling.

Factor 3: Value

Value is the perceived benefit or worth one believes he or she is receiving from attendance in counseling. Potential clients who would score high in this area often believed the financial cost of counseling was not worth its benefits. Participants in this category simply could not afford counseling or they didn't have time for it. Many participants in this category believed counseling wasn't necessary because problems usually resolve on their own, or that counseling was simply not an effective use of their time. These individuals simply did not embrace the counseling process because the financial costs in their mind are hard to justify over meeting basic needs and/or having to take time off from work.

Although some individuals cannot find a counselor to their liking, participants worried whether counseling would be worthwhile, or they were ashamed or embarrassed about going to counseling. Most people believe that when faced with difficult life problems, counseling could be helpful.

It is hoped through research like this, people can better understand why they might be hesitant to seek a counselor and maybe overcome some of their fears. Additionally, this research can help national organizations, in the helping fields, find ways to help clients overcome these barriers.



Edward Neukrug

Edward Neukrug is a Professor of Counseling and Human Services at Old Dominion University. In addition to teaching, Dr. Neukrug has worked as a counselor at a crisis center, an outpatient therapist at a mental health center, an associate school psychologist, a school counselor, and as a private practice psychologist and licensed professional counselor.